

The place of colonial terminology within Religious Studies

Sikhi, “Sikhism”, *Sikhism*, or Sikhi(sm):

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About the essay:

This essay traces the effects of colonial terminology on the scholarship of Sikhi, how the negative Colonial “World Religions” term impacts the theology and vernacular aspect of Sikh religion. Ultimately, to the detriment of Sikh identity.

About author:

Vishal Sangu is a teaching assistant, currently applying for PhD opportunities. He has just undertaken a Masters by Research in Humanities at the University of Wolverhampton. His Masters thesis traced how colonialism affects Sikh identity through texts, translations, beliefs, and ideas. He calls for a decolonisation of Sikhi and Religious Studies. You can follow his research at Twitter @[VishalSangu](#). All other relative links can be found on his Twitter page.

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Sikhi(sm):

[...] what I've often discovered, you know, plenty of the studies or books or courses and what-not will pay **lip-service** [emphasis mine] to the [project of decolonising] . . . they'll say "Religion is a constructed category, bound up in colonial history and referring to Protestant Christianity." And then, "Let's just get on with using it, just like we would normally do." That's something that we should try and avoid! (Nye and Cotter, 2020, 20:00).

This essay will focus on debates into whether the term "Sikhism" is sufficient and whether it is necessary, appropriate, and realistic to change the terminology into the more accurate term of Sikhi. First, I explore the debates of Sikh identity and the issues of the term "Sikhism". Secondly, I explore where the term religion comes from and the impositions this carries on to a Sikh identity. Thirdly, I explore specific debates about the problems of English translations, not only by orientalist, but by Sikhs as well.

There is a consensus within Sikh studies that the term "Sikhism" is a western word coined by Christian outsiders (Mandair, 2013). These outsiders carry their impositions of what European religion looks like and apply this agenda into the making of a Sikh World Religion (Mandair, 2013, 3). The word Sikhi comes from the word Sikh. Its etymology begins in the Sanskrit word *Shishya*, in Panjabi this would be the word *Sikhna* (Mandair, 2013, 3). The concept of learning and being a disciple is such a key concept in Sikhi, that the word Sikh means to be a learner or disciple. This meaning is philosophical, theological, historical, and metaphysical; where the Sikh would *Sikh(na)* [learn] from the Guru, the word "Sikhism" doesn't have this meaning. The term "Sikhism" is insufficient and inaccurate in its general presentation of "Sikhism" as a World Religion, where Sikhs are presented as a homogenous and unified community (Ballantyne, 2006, 25). However due to the diaspora, migration, and settlement this is not true.

I suggest the use of the term Sikhi is not used to evoke a romantic sense of returning to a pre-modern version of the religion¹, it is a form of decolonisation. Using the term Sikhi is a recognition of moving past problematic colonial terminology that has presided and influences Sikh studies. Sikhi, in the terminology that I propose, recognises the religion of the Sikhs not as a “World Religion”; that is understood in Protestant terms, but as a tradition that must be understood as it is lived and used within its vernacular form. Rather than a rigid de-politicised entity. I seek not to only change the term “Sikhism” within academia, which is something I believe Arvind-Pal Mandair (2013) is seeking to do within his term *Sikhism*. I want to change and challenge how Sikhs are viewed in society and in their daily religious and non-religious life, where Sikhi informs both aspects of it. Current scholarly debates into the Sikh diaspora do not acknowledge the colonial implications of the term “Sikhism”.

Another debate within scholarship is the issue with the terminology of “religion” and the colonial project of “religion making”. The main issue with the term “religion” as Talal Asad argues, is that it suggests and supports the trend to universalise a Christian Protestant notion of religion (Ahluwalia, 2011, 98). The term religion, as argued by Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), doesn’t exist as an analytical category, as it differs in its meaning within different cultures (Fitzgerald, 2000, 4). This is an issue in understanding “Sikhism” as the Christian Protestant notion of religion relegates “Sikhism” to the private sphere. Through focusing on the practice of religion in individual and de-political ways. This has implications for the *Miri-Piri* (temporal/secular realm and spiritual/religious realm) dynamic and the role of the *Sangat* (congregation)². The term “religion” has its origins in Western terminology, the history, and

¹ A fair criticism, as Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair (2013, 13) notes that returning to pre-colonial elements of Sikhi can evoke romanticism.

² Sikh traditions highlight the importance of the community as demonstrated through the creation of the *Khalsa*.

impositions it carries emerge out of colonial white European Christian traditions (Nye, 2019, 15). Western impositions and expectations that influence the study of religion can be difficult to meet. Especially with the baggage (Bauman, Bohannon, and O'Brien, 2017, 28) that religions must operate in the private sphere, must have a sole focus on creed, text, and founders, and finally the translation of texts into vernacular language.

There remains a sharp racial divide between the colonised and the coloniser where binary opposites between the two are made within the politics of religion. With the mode of translation and language being the main application of this (Singh, 2005, 159). These binary opposites include the divide and rule tactic between Hindu and Sikh, Britishness and Indianness, and the superiority of the Protestant model of religion over pre-colonial forms of religion. These themes are largely ignored within the study of Religion, especially in Religious Education within British Primary and Secondary schools that relies heavily on the World Religions Paradigm. Although there are calls to move past this and recognise the issues of the term "World Religions"³ (CORE, 2018, 5 and 74).

The issues of "Sikhism" as a "World Religion" are largely overlooked. To combat the issue Protestant modes of studying religion bring; lived religion and the recognition of what it means when the term "religion" (Fitzgerald, 2000) is used are extremely important. Whether that be in a classroom, university setting, institutional setting, or in research. As found in research findings when Participants A and B discussed their issues with the term "Lord".

The problems of terminology, highlighted in the literature and exemplified by my fieldwork interviews, demonstrated that Sikhi is the correct and appropriate term for discourse. There

³ The alternative term proposed is "Religion and Worldviews" seems to be focused on incorporating "Spiritualities" and "New Religions Movements" rather than directly fixing the issues of the World Religions Paradigm treating religion as a 'de-political', private, creedal identity.

is a cause for caution when using the term “religion” and “Sikhism”. Despite the discussion of terminology, issues of the Christian translations haunt Sikh texts. Jasjit Singh (2018) recognises the politics of translation, where there is a rejection of Sikh terms, such as *Sikhi*, *Gurmat*, or *Dharam* in favour of Christian terms. Even when these terms are not necessary and impact understandings (Singh, 2018 346). This is an issue so ingrained in Sikh thought that Sikh translators such as Sant Singh Khalsa (2017) are guilty of this. Khalsa’s (2017) translation reinforces Christian norms, whereby the translated word becomes the meaning of the text. Such as the focus on the term “God” in his translation of *Japji Sahib* (Khalsa, 2017, 1). The term “God” becomes the norm within Sikh thought, texts, and translations.

What is yet to be discussed is the issue and implications of colonial translations in Sikh and Religious Studies. English words carry impositions and certain Panjabi/Gurmukhi words can be difficult to translate. This becomes even more problematic if certain words are rooted in Sanskrit, Persian, or Arabic etymology, where a word may have a double meaning. I propose instead of translating Sikh texts word for word into English, some words can stand in their original Gurmukhi/Panjabi and can be explained in a commentary, or as a footnote. This would mean a focus and central importance on the reading of important teachings such as the terms *shabad-Guru* (commonly translated to special sound that is transmitted by a teacher, yet its meaning is a lot more philosophical⁴), *nirgun-sargun* (translated as form and formless⁵), and *anand* (translated as eternal happiness⁶) (Abeysekara, 2011, 125).

⁴ *Shabad* is translated to mean sound, however, its meaning is a lot deeper than this. *Shabad* is a sound of wisdom that dispels the ego, the Guru is the one who gives the knowledge of this *Shabad*.

⁵ This concept shows the duality and understanding of *Akal Purakh* [meaning Timeless Being] as both *nirgun* and *sargun*, transcendent and immanent. This concept was wrongly understood by Ernest Trumpp, he translated these qualities as separate entities, accusing Sikhs of believing in pantheism (Trumpp, 1877, c). Showing the need for care over translations.

⁶ *Anand* is more than happiness; it is a term most Sikhs struggle to translate as it is a metaphysical quality. *Anand* is immense joy and an inspiration to everyday life, it is inspiration on both a physical and mental, and even spiritual level.

This would follow suit with Biblical Studies, where some concepts are explained using the Hebrew word; this is especially important for names⁷. Sikh studies could use commentaries to explain important Sikh concepts, for example, in most Sikh translations of the word *anand*, it is translated as ecstasy (Khalsa, 2017, 917). Its philosophical, mental, spiritual, and physical meaning is reduced to the English translation, rather than explaining what the term *anand* means. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (1995, 35) mentions the issue of the English language carrying impositions. As English words carry impositions, they avidly affect Sikh identity. The research process attempted to rectify this.

I made detailed notes about what I see in a variety of Gurdwaras in Birmingham. One of the most interesting developments I have seen in the Gurdwara is in the realm of prayer for Sikhs: a projector screen is used to display the translations of the scriptures. One line would be the original Gurmukhi or Panjabi line, one line would be a translation of the text into the English, and a line will be a transliteration of the text in Panjabi to be read out (mostly by the *Sangat*).

This interesting development comes about due to the digital age that we live in now. Jasjit Singh (2018) accredited online translations, that can be downloaded such as 'SikhiToTheMax' (Singh, 2018, 342) that has English translations, being used by Gurdwaras. This use of digital methods is not exclusive to the diaspora, this method is also employed through the broadcast of *Japji Sahib* and *Kirtan* or the *Rehras Sahib* and *Kirtan* on the tv channel "PTC Punjabi" or being available on the online platform *Youtube* (PTCPunjabi, 2021). These translations use English-Christian-gendered language such as 'thou' or 'God', 'Soul', 'Lord', etc. Future research may have to include interviewing committee members to see if they recognise the

⁷ For example, the name *Sarah*, in English it can be difficult to understand what this name might signify, however in its Hebrew/Greek it means princess; this concept can be and is extremely useful for understanding a text and the role of the character (Fitzmyer, 2002, 149).

issues of using Christian-English language in the institution of the Gurdwara, and to investigate methods to move past these, providing a platform, programme, or recommendations for this.

I have noticed that Sikh prayers are available to be downloaded on smartphones, yet phones are recommended to be switched off in the *Darbar Sahib*. I question if phones are allowed to be used within the *Darbar Sahib* to read or sing scripture, I've seen some *Kirtan Jathas* (*kirtan* groups) use their phones because of the ease of use to find *Shabads* (prayers) to sing. I query about the exact *Maryada* (rule) for this. Despite the ambiguity of the rules behind this, it is important to note this is mainly done by the young Sikh diaspora, meaning they have easy access to platforms that provide English translations that I deem as problematic, yet rely on the Panjabi or Gurmukhi to sing *Kirtan*. This observation shows how important the digital age is to the modern Sikh diaspora and goes beyond language.

Pashaura Singh (2014) notes that no translation can ever do justice to the original text and English translations by Indian authors are inadequate for academic use, due to a lack on quality (2014, 632). Singh roots his propositions in recognising the colonial project of translation, as a tool, to create a vision of religious traditions that could be used to manipulate and control the general public (Singh, 2014, 635). These issues lead to Singh proposing for an international team of translators⁸ to do justice to the Sikh text, working in unison to protect the teachings and present the academic value that Sikh texts possess (Singh, 2014, 636). This project would be reminiscent of studies in Biblical Studies, whereby a team of translators

⁸ This project suggestion is currently evident by the research being undertaken by the Sikh Research Institute through *The Guru Granth Sahib Project* (2020) to tackle some of the issues currently seen in English translations of Sikh scripture.

combine to translate Hebrew, Greek, or Latin texts. This method allows an honest and necessary insight into the issues of the English language.

The NSRV translation of the Bible acknowledges the use of Hebrew terms instead of English 'where it was deemed appropriate to do so, information is supplied in footnotes from subsidiary Jewish traditions... [hence recognising] occasionally it is evident the text has suffered in transmission and that none of the versions provides a satisfactory restoration' (NSRV, xiii). This is something Sikh translations do not do. Instead, they mostly translate into English word for word from the original Gurmukhi. If the move for an international effort to translate Sikh texts takes place, its methodology must recognise the shortcomings of colonial translations and how certain modern Sikh English translations have replicated these shortcomings; it must strive to move past these.

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